

You Can Make a
STRING PUPPET

by

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photographs by

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Making a string puppet is good fun. If you think that such a task is beyond you, then follow me step by step: you will soon see how easy it really is.

I shall not use too many words; and the photographs will do their share in making things clear.

MATERIALS

Here is a list of materials you will need:—

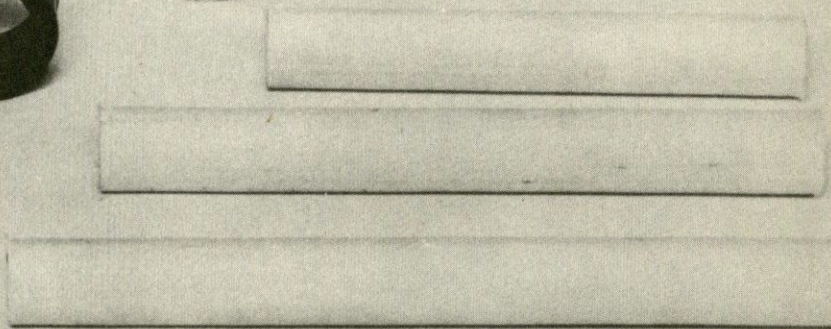
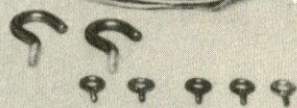
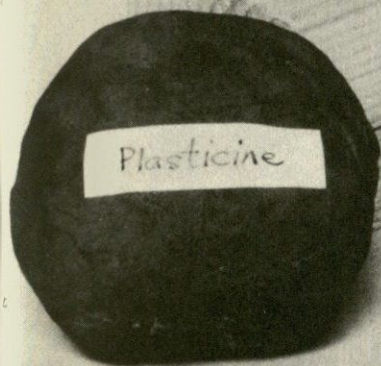
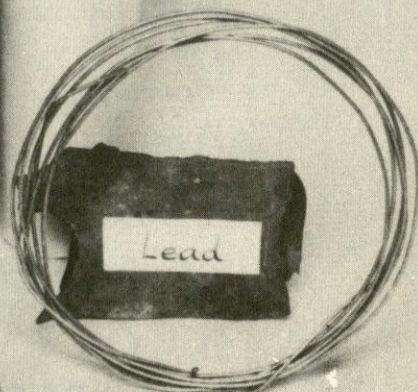
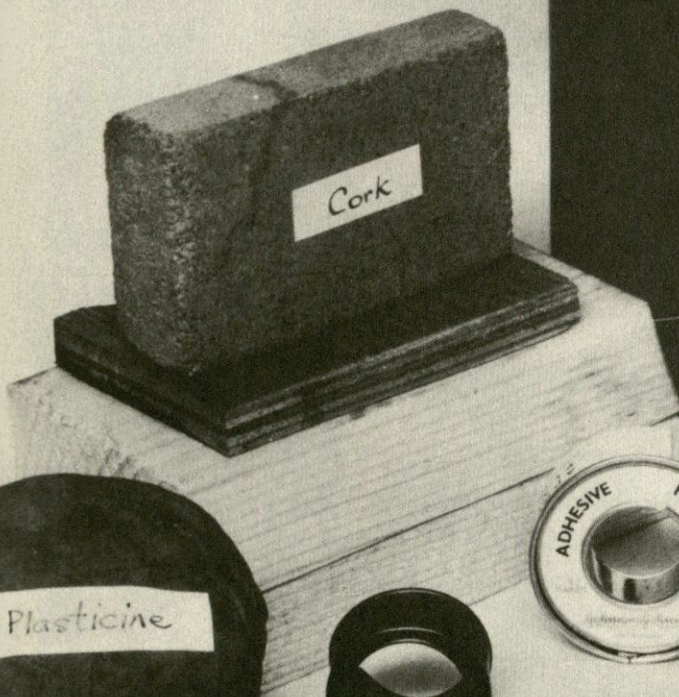
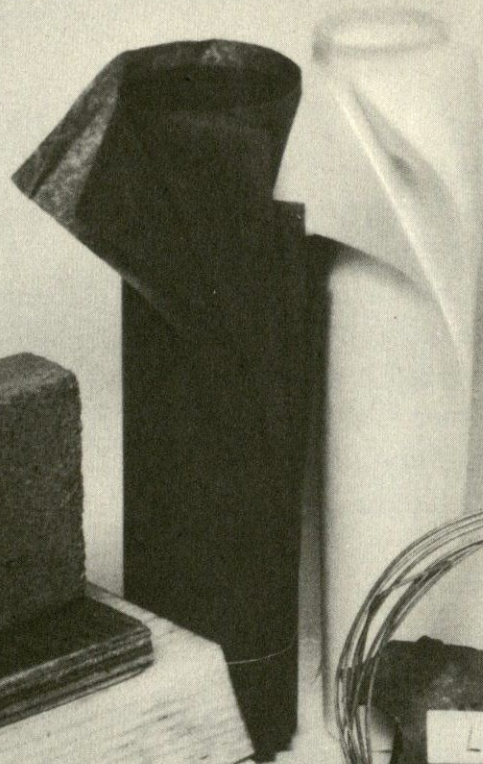
A piece of wood (deal is easy to work) size about two inches thick, three inches wide, and four-and-a-half inches long.

A small piece of 5-ply wood, or other wood about half-an-inch thick.

Plasticine: just over a pound-and-a-half.

A twenty-six inch length of three-quarters-of-an-inch dowelling.

Paste; tissue paper (two colours); wire; adhesive plaster; plastic tape (same width as dowelling); tube of glue; lead; cork; some nails and a screw; brass eyes and hooks; carpet thread; paint.



TOOLS

It would be possible to make this puppet with a penknife. But this would be hard work.

The tools I have used I have set out for you to see. Such tools are always useful, and not expensive.

Here is a list of them :—

Hammer.

Coping saw or fretsaw.

Small handsaw.

Pliers.

Wood chisel.

Wood file.

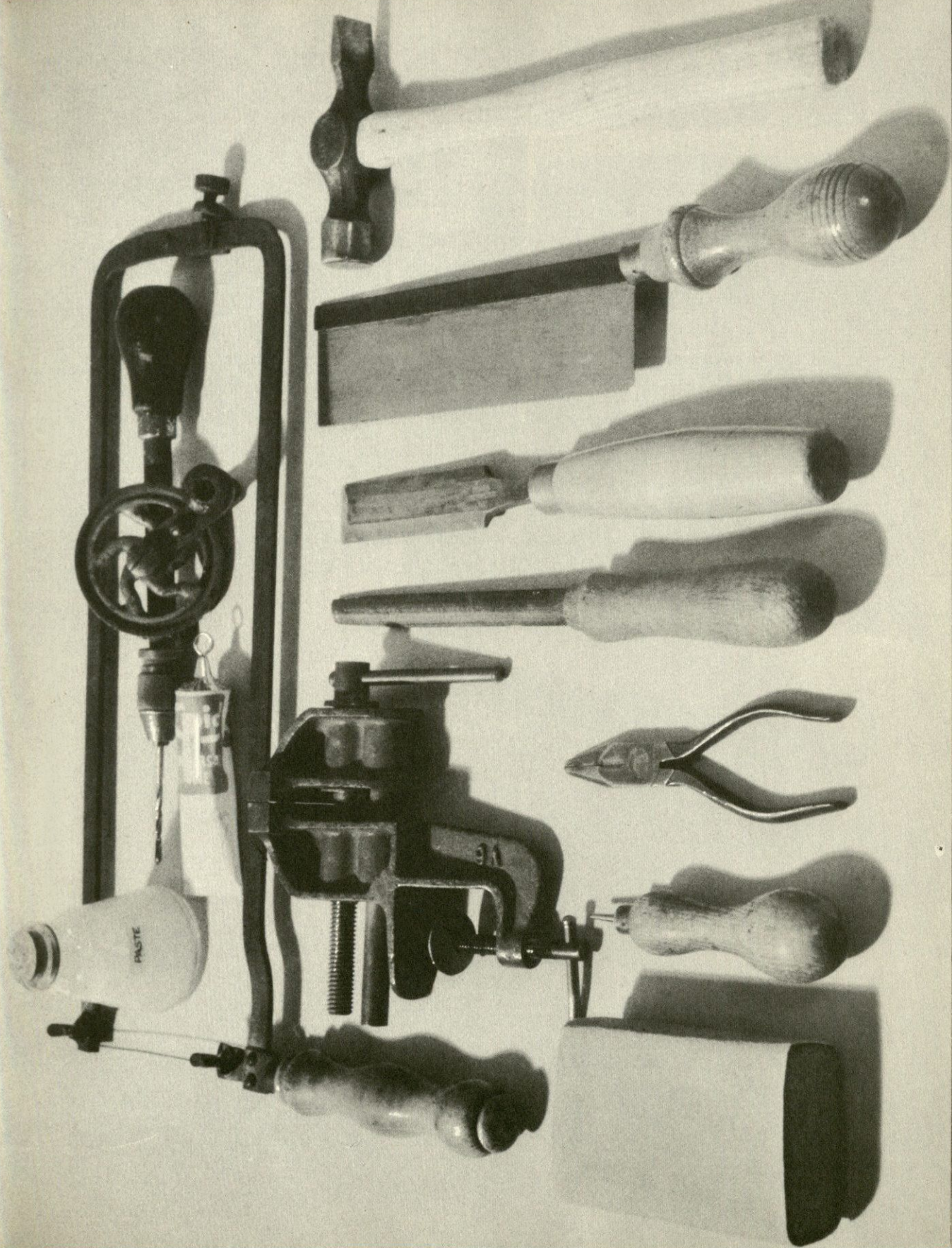
Drill.

Bradawl.

Sand paper and block.

You should also have a small vice.

Just a word or two about the puppet's measurements. Those I give are for your guidance. You can make the legs and arms longer or shorter, the body fatter or thinner, just as you wish.



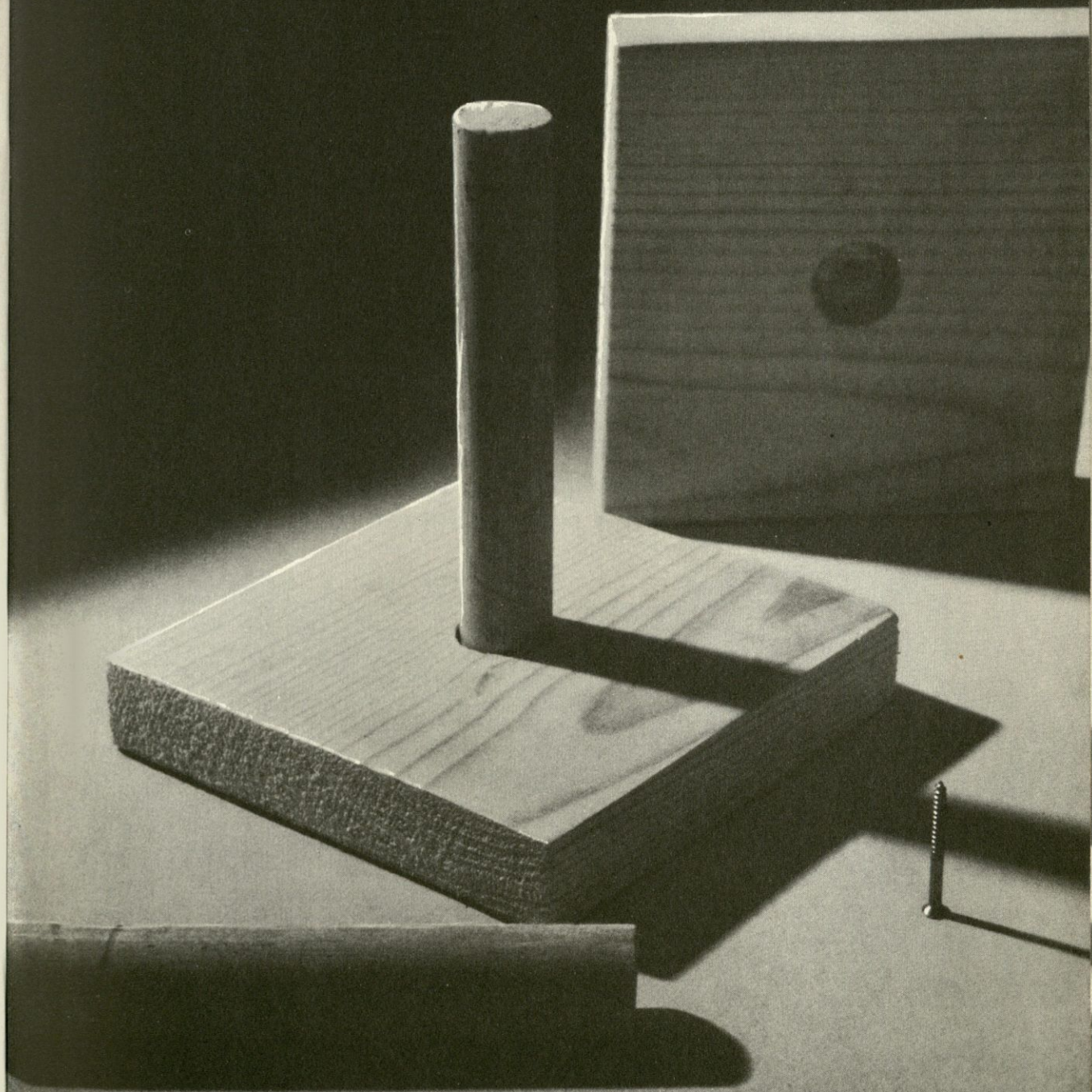
STAND FOR MODELLING HEAD

The materials for this are not included in the list already given. They are a piece of wood six inches square, and a piece of broomstick six inches long.

A hole to take the broomstick is made in the centre of the square piece of wood. Make it about half the thickness of the wood; then pierce a hole with your bradawl through the centre of the remaining wood to allow the screw to pass easily.

The broomstick is then inserted and screwed firmly to the board.

Instead of this stand, a bottle with a suitably-shaped neck can be used. But first fill the bottle with sand or earth to keep it steady.



MAKING THE HEAD ONE

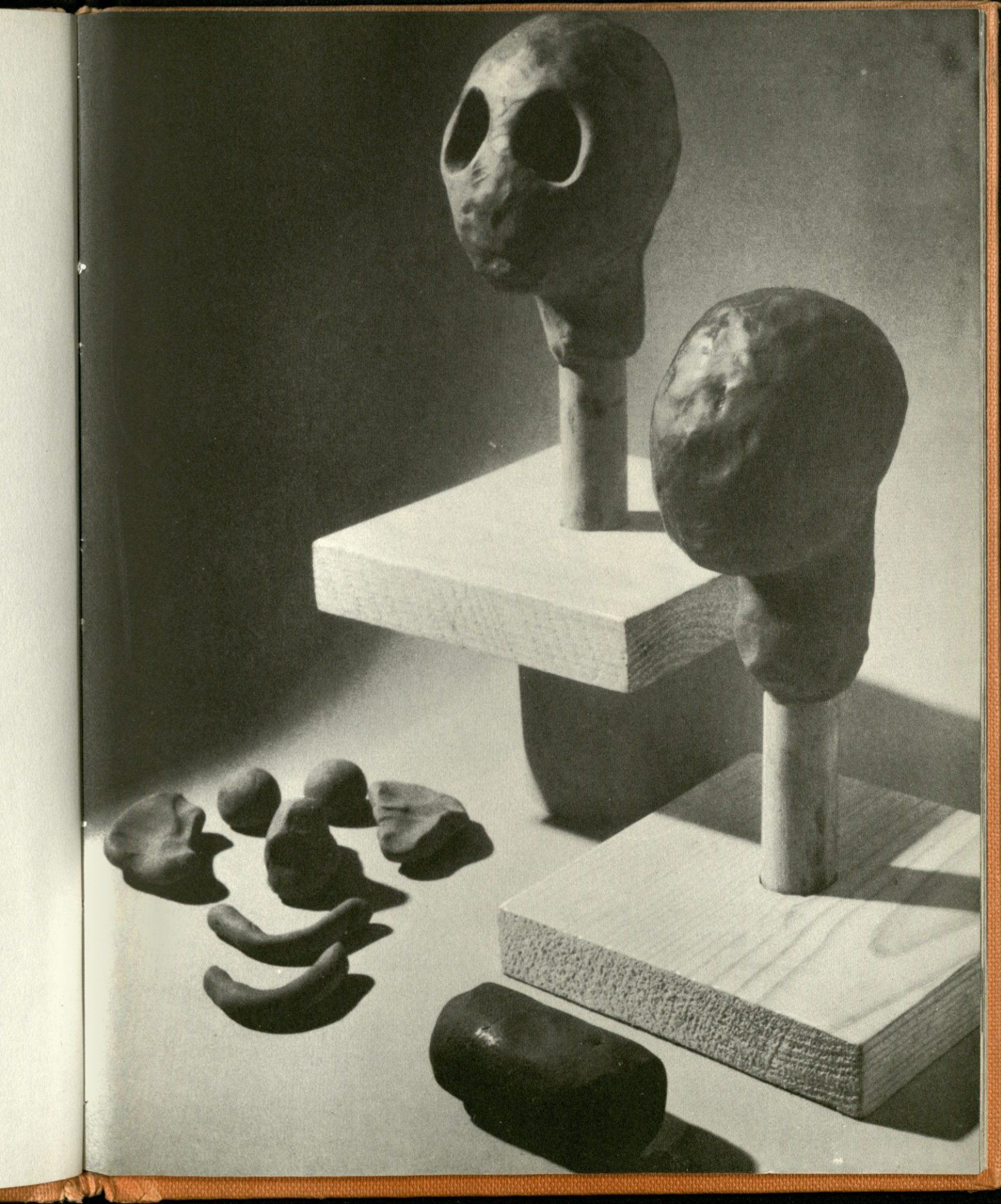
Make the plasticine soft by kneading it well. Roll it into a ball about four inches in diameter. Place this on the stand and press down over the stick to form a neck.

The neck should be an inch-and-a-half long and the same in diameter.

Model the head to an egg-shape with the thickest part at the top. This will be clear from the photograph. If you remember that the board is six inches square, you will have a good idea of the size of the head.

Press in the two sockets for the eyes with your thumbs.

Take another piece of plasticine and make two small balls for the eyes, two ears, a nose, and roll two pieces for the lips.



MAKING THE HEAD TWO

Fit the eyes, ears, and nose on to the head, pressing them firmly into position.

Now you are ready to model the features of the puppet. Big, bold features are best. They will make the puppet more interesting.

Shape the features according to your own ideas, and leave the surface of the plasticine fairly smooth for the next step.



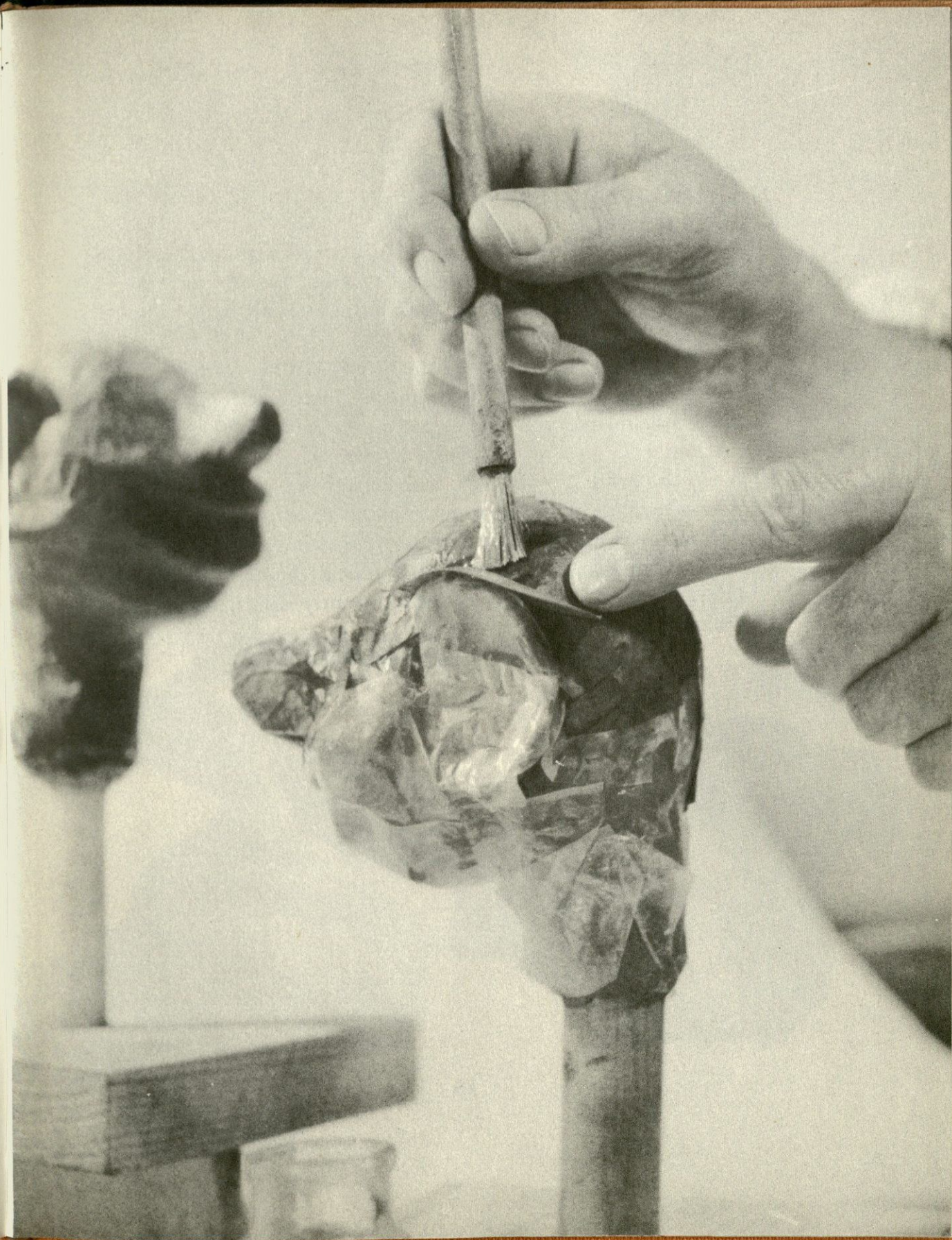
MAKING THE HEAD THREE

Cut up the tissue paper into, roughly, inch-and-a-half squares.

Two colours should be used, say a white and a blue. This will ensure a complete covering of the head with each layer: you will be able to notice any places which may have been missed.

It is now a question of making the head which will be used on the string puppet. Eight layers, at least, of tissue paper will have to be pasted over the plasticine. This is done as follows.

Smear the head all over with a light coat of vaseline, and use vaseline for sticking down the first layer of squares. The rest of the layers are thus stopped from sticking to the plasticine. If the first layer is white then the next will be blue, and then white again, and so on. Each layer after the first is pasted down: the gloy-type of paste is very suitable for this. Make certain that each square overlaps the one before, and work the paste well into the paper, taking care to cover the whole square.



MAKING THE HEAD FOUR

Carry on pasting on the squares, a layer of white, a layer of blue, until the eight layers are completed. It is important that the squares should overlap each other, as this makes the head strong.

When the last layer is finished the head must be thoroughly dried. Leave it in a warm, dry room for a day or two for this purpose. Meanwhile you can be getting on with another part of the puppet.

When the head is really dry, trim round the bottom of the neck with a sharp penknife, so as to make a clean edge. Then beginning at the top of the head, cut across the head and down through the ear and neck, and repeat the other side.

The two halves can now be prised gently apart, clear of the plasticine.



MAKING THE HEAD FIVE

You will need a piece of cork and some flexible wire.

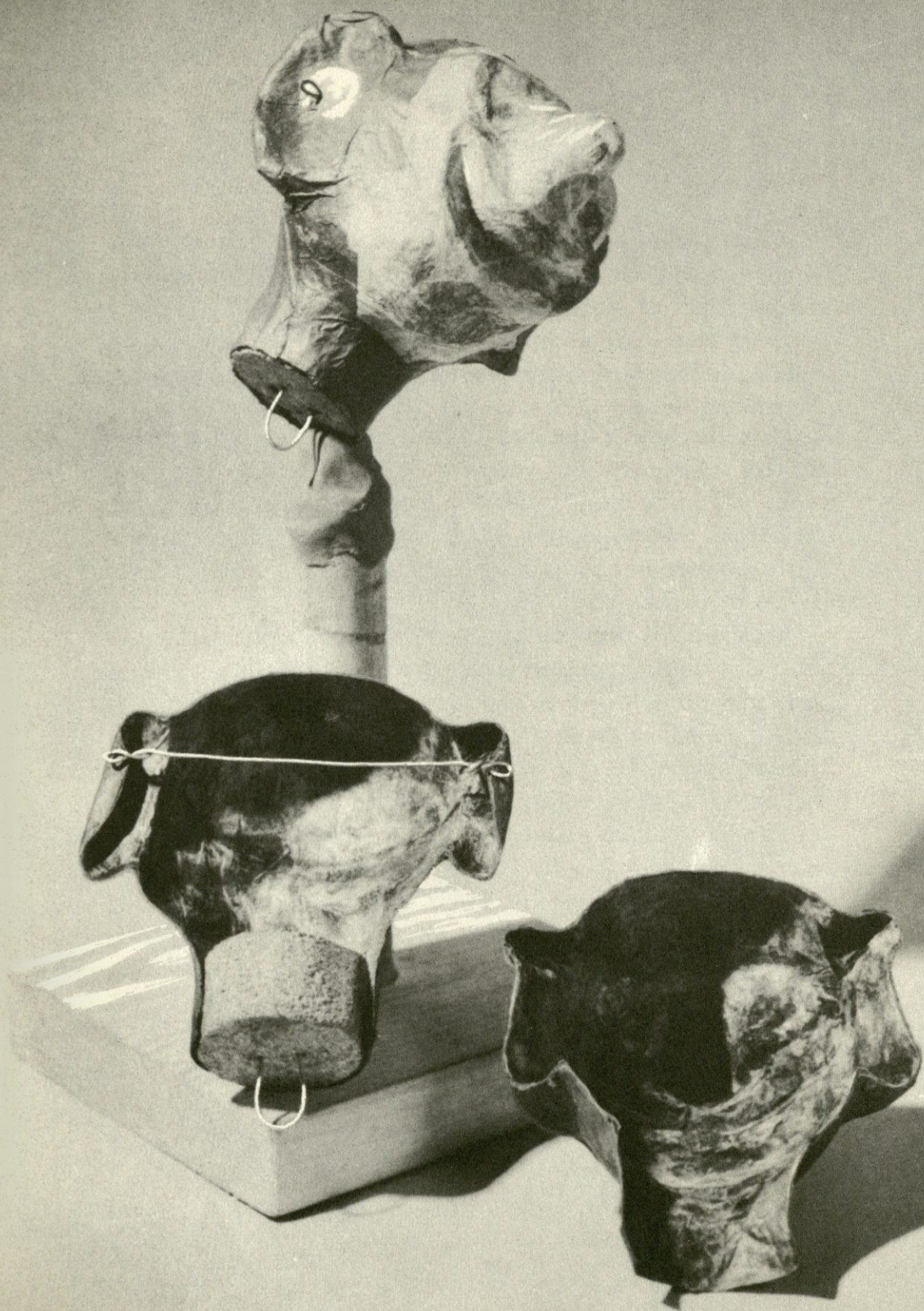
Shape the cork round and of a size to fit exactly inside the bottom of the neck when the two halves of the head are placed together. Cut a piece of wire about four inches long and push each end through the cork at separate places to make a loop just over half-an-inch long. The two ends which protrude at the top of the cork are twisted together to make the wire secure. Get the loop as near the centre of the cork as possible.

Glue one half of the neck to the cork.

Take another piece of wire, straighten it, and make a tiny loop either end. This wire is laid across the inside of the head so that the loops protrude just beyond the ears.

Glue the remaining edge of the cork and around the cut edges of the head. Stick the two halves together, keeping the loops at the ears in position.

Hold the two halves together for a while for the glue to set a little. The cut around the head is then strengthened by pasting two layers of tissue paper over the join. Additional pieces should be pasted beside the loops at the ears to make a strong job.



PAINTING THE HEAD

After the finished head is dry it is ready for painting. For this you will need some flat white paint and some oil colours. Small tubes of students' oil colours will do quite well: a crimson lake (red), a chrome lemon (yellow), an ultramarine (blue), and an ivory black. Various other colours can be made by mixing these.

Give the head a first coat of flat white paint and let it dry.

Mix a little red and yellow to make an orange, and add some flat white paint to make a flesh tint. Paint the head all over with this. While the flesh colour is still wet, work in a little red into the cheeks, nose, and the tips of the ears, in order to liven up the colour.

When this is dry, outline the eyes and lips in black. Any mistakes can be removed with a rag dipped in turpentine. A coloured comic will give you ideas on how to paint the face. Leave a small v-shape at the top of each pupil and paint it white. This makes the eyes look alive. Let the outlines dry before finishing the painting of the face.

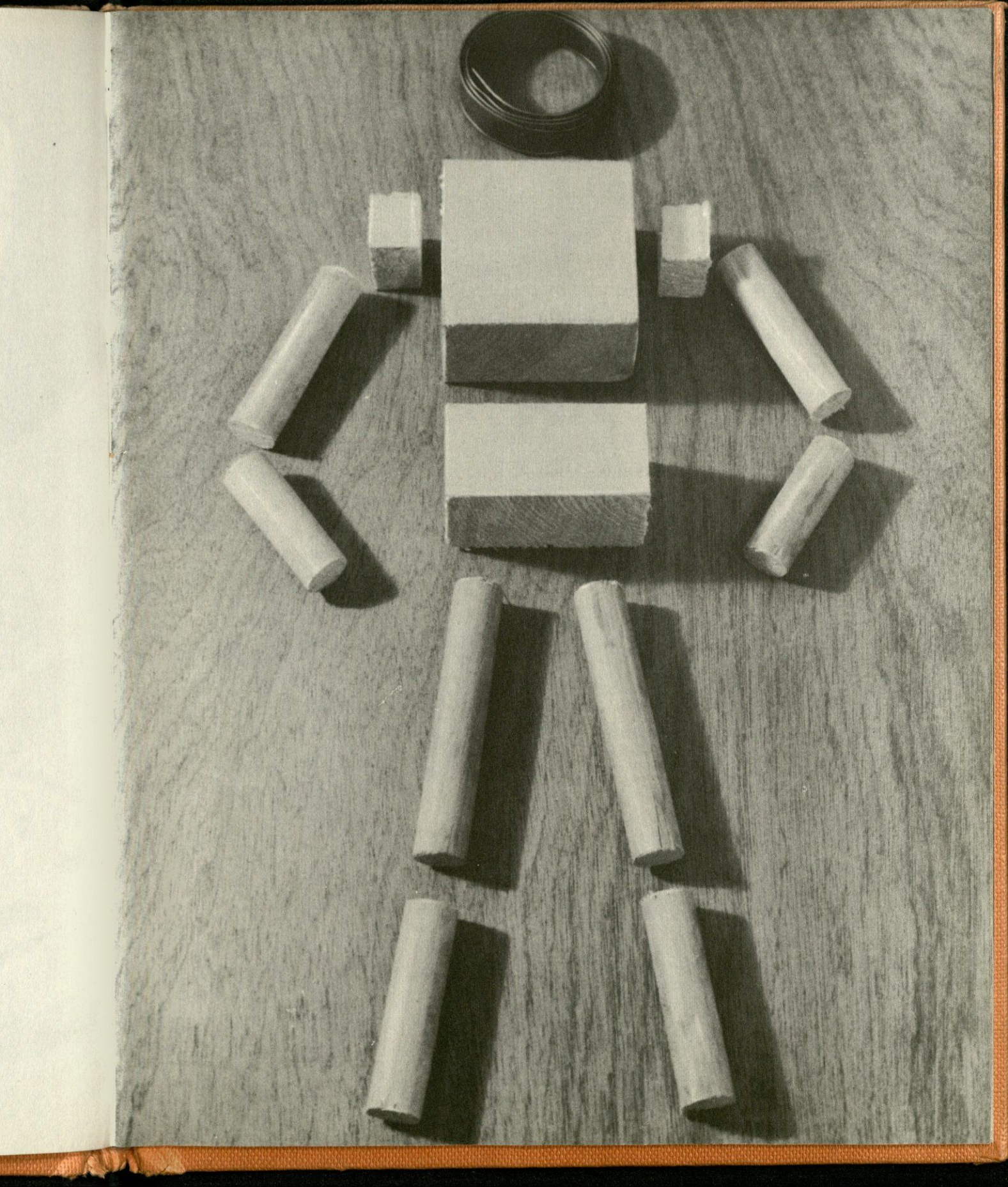
The hair can be painted on. But the best method is to use crepe hair. This can be got at the chemist's. Very little is needed, and it is glued on. Put a thin coating of glue on top of the head and make it tacky with the fingers. The hair is pressed on to this.



MAKING THE BODY

The wood for the body is cut as follows:—

- CHEST: Two inches thick; three inches long; three inches wide.
- HIPS: Two inches thick; one-and-a-half inches long; three inches wide.
- SHOULDERS: Two small pieces one inch by one inch by three-quarters-of-an-inch.
- ARMS: Upper arms, two pieces of three-quarters-of-an-inch dowelling three inches long; lower arms, two pieces two-and-a-quarter inches long.
- LEGS: Top, two pieces of three-quarters-of-an-inch dowelling four-and-a-quarter inches long; lower, two pieces three inches long.



CHEST AND HIPS

CHEST: Notice which way the grain of the wood runs and work with the grain. Measure and draw the outlines of the neck slot, one-and-a-quarter inches wide and one inch deep. Make a number of saw cuts in the waste wood before removing it with a chisel, and this will make its removal easier. Make two sockets to take the shoulder pieces. These are easily sawn out. Shape the chest.

SHOULDERS: Nail on the shoulder pieces and shape them afterwards. In each piece drill one hole in the top and another through the side to meet it. Through this hole thread a length of looped fishing line. Hammer a veneer pin half-way home just behind the nail which holds the shoulder piece. Loop the line over the pin and bend the pin down. The upper arm is attached here later.

HIPS: Make a saw cut half-an-inch deep along the bottom of the hips. This is to take the leg tapes. Shape by paring down the four corners.

Sandpaper the wood well to give it a good finish.



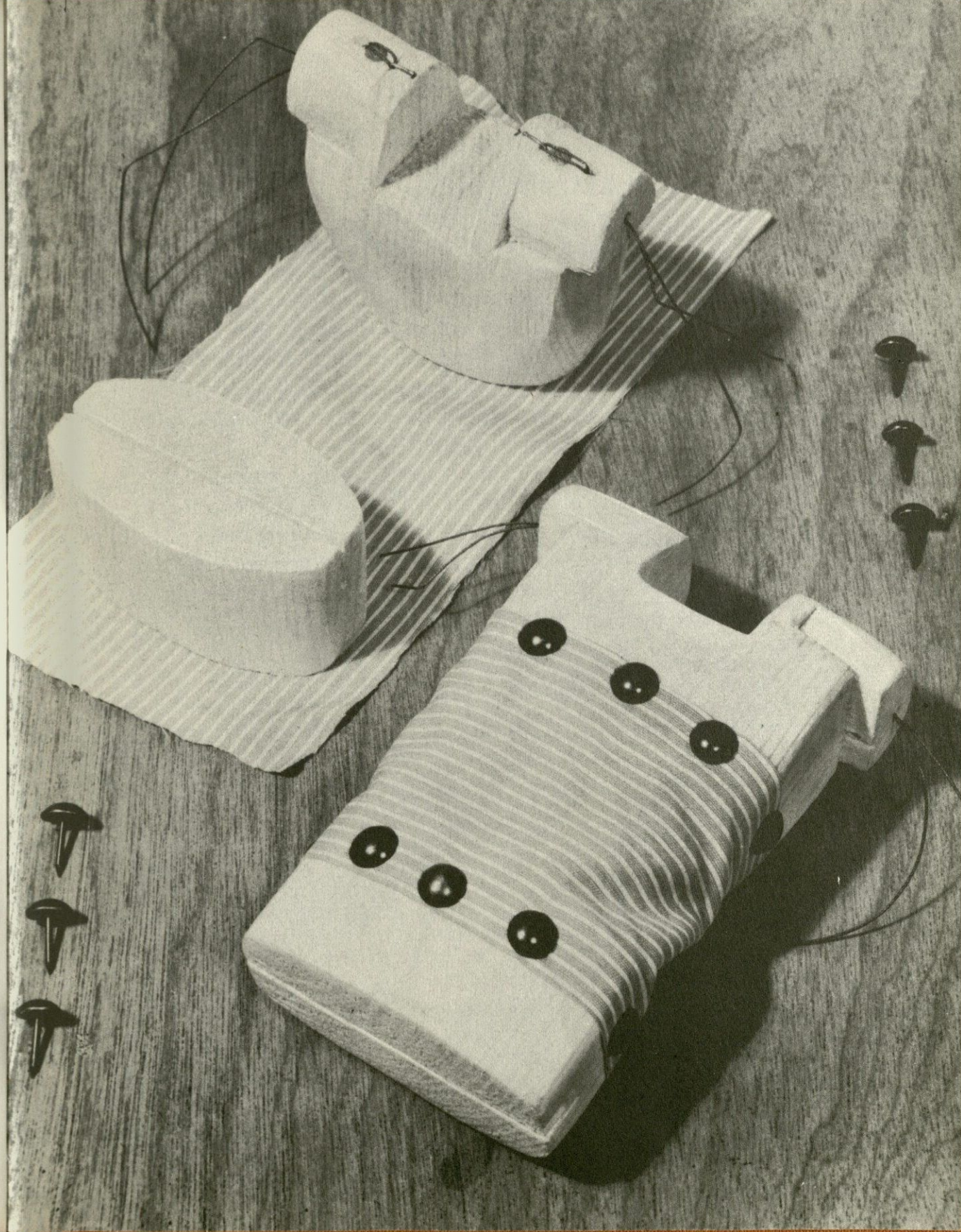
THE TRUNK

The chest and hips now have to be joined.

For this you will need a piece of material (part of an old shirt or handkerchief will do) nine inches long by four-and-a-half inches wide.

Fasten the material to the chest and the hips, leaving a space of one-and-a-quarter inches between the two. Use upholsterers' pins for nailing down the material. These prevent the cloth tearing, and are easily removed if need be.

Make sure the saw cut is facing away from the chest.



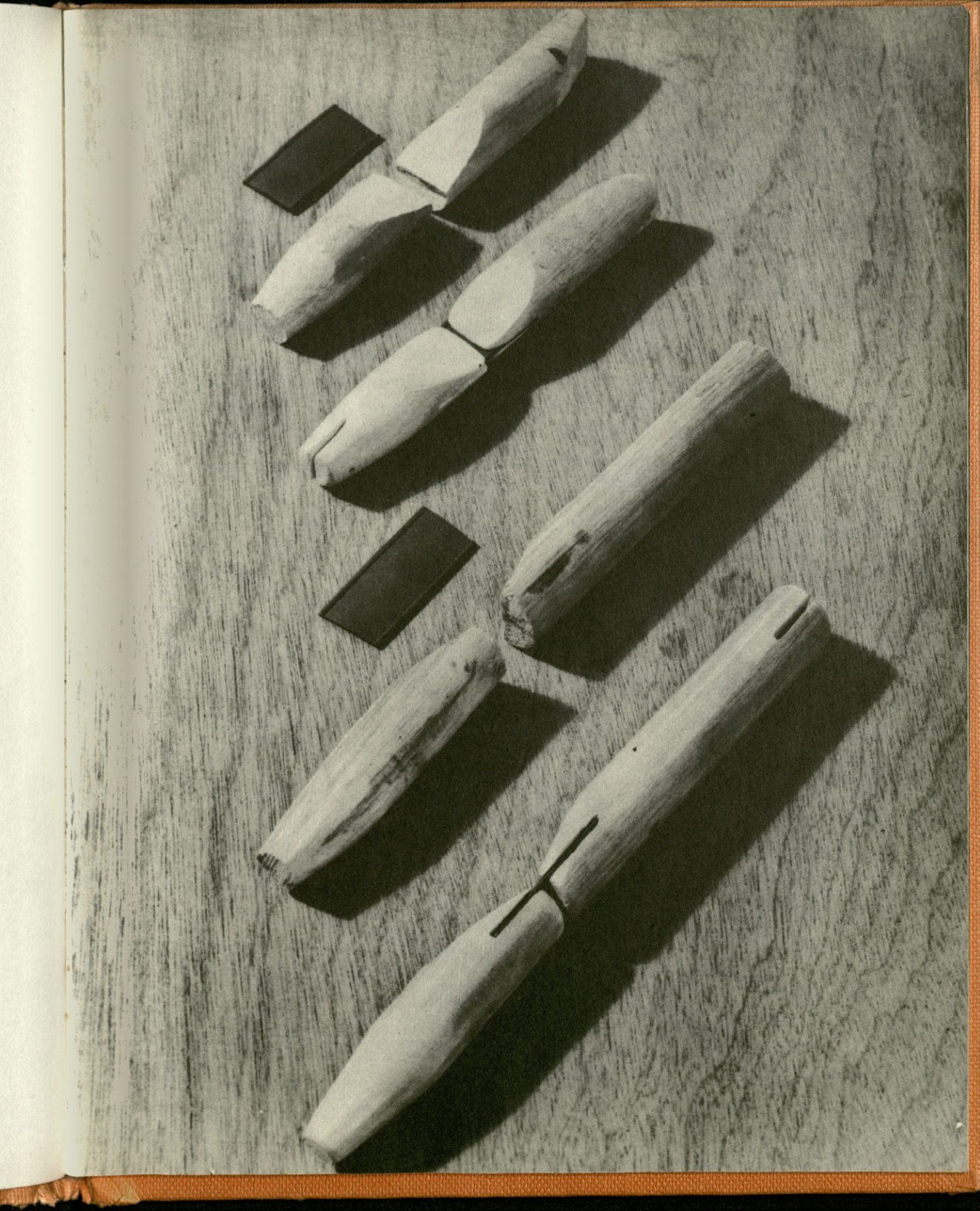
ARMS AND LEGS

Reference to the photographs will best show how these are made. It is better to shape the dowelling before making the saw cuts. Hold the wood firmly in a vice while making the cuts, which should be about half-an-inch deep.

Notice that the top of the right upper arm is pared off in the opposite manner to the left upper arm. A hole is drilled through the top of the upper arm to take the fishing line which joins it to the shoulder piece.

Through the bottom of the lower arm drill a small hole. When the hand is placed in the slot here, a piece of wire is put through this hole to prevent the hand coming out.

The plastic tape should fit neatly in the saw cuts and is made fast in each piece of dowelling by two veneer pins which are then snipped off and filed down.

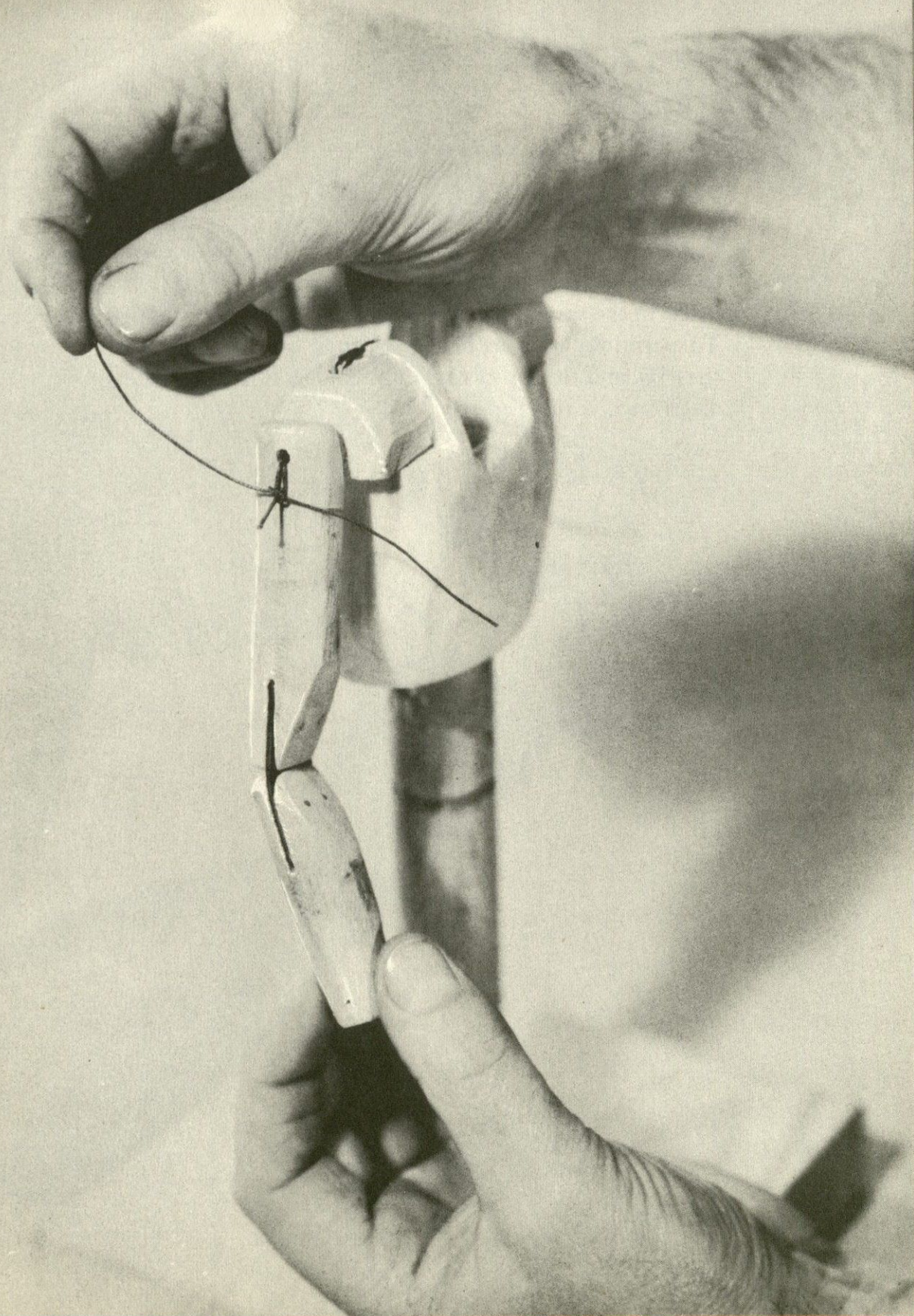


FIXING THE ARMS

In this photograph you will see how the holes have been drilled in the arm, and how the pins are holding the tape secure.

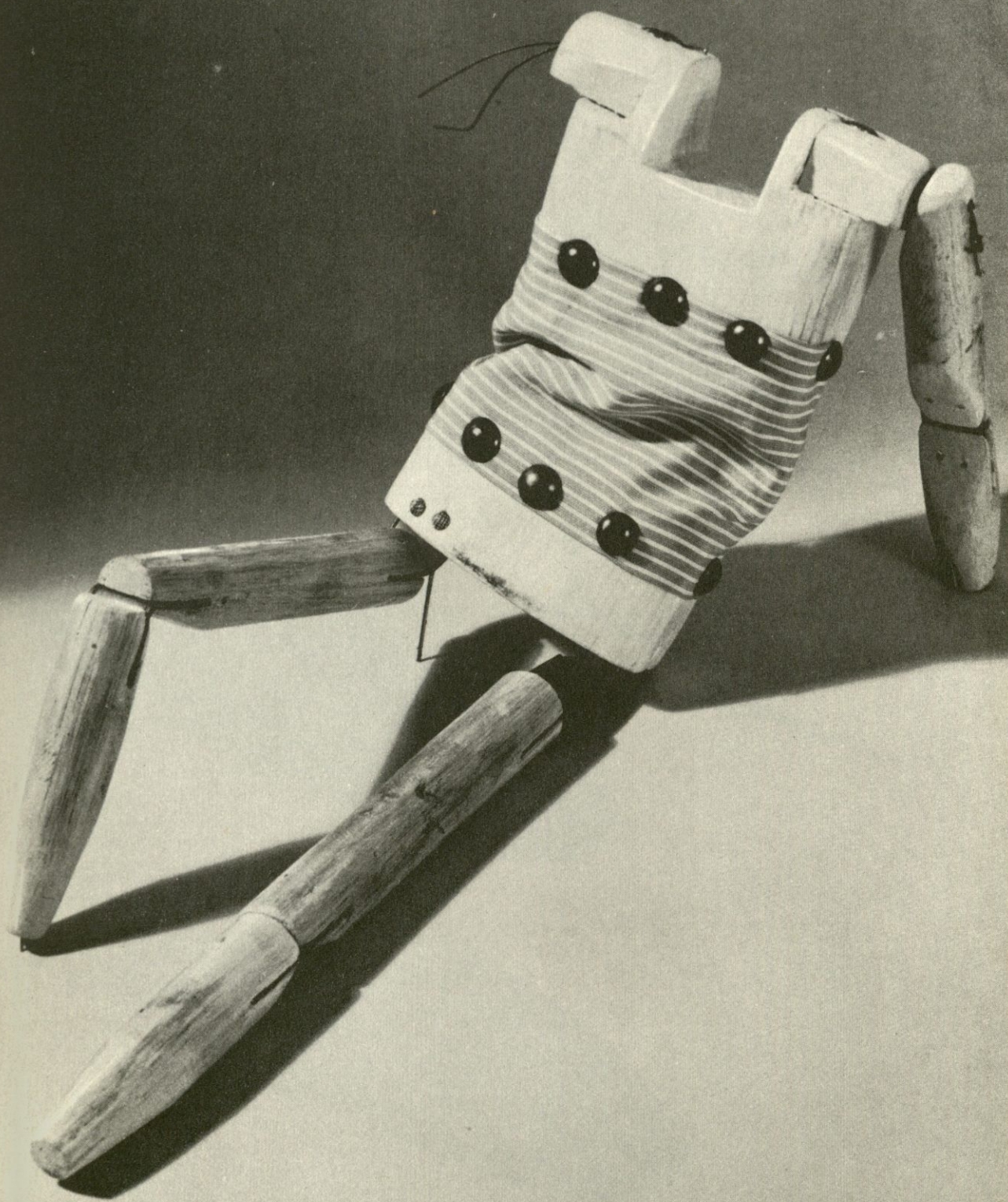
Knock in another veneer pin just below the hole in the upper arm, leaving part of the pin sticking out.

Thread the two ends of the fishing line through the hole in the upper arm and fasten them in a knot under the pin, ensuring that the arm fits snugly against the shoulder piece but not too tightly. Bend down the pin to secure the line, and cut away loose ends.



FIXING THE LEGS

A piece of plastic tape is put in the saw cut at the top of each leg and fastened there with veneer pins. This tape is then fitted in the saw cut in the hip and secured there by two nails. To permit the leg to bend, the tape between the bottom of the hips and the top of the leg should be left free: five-eighths-of-an-inch is just right.



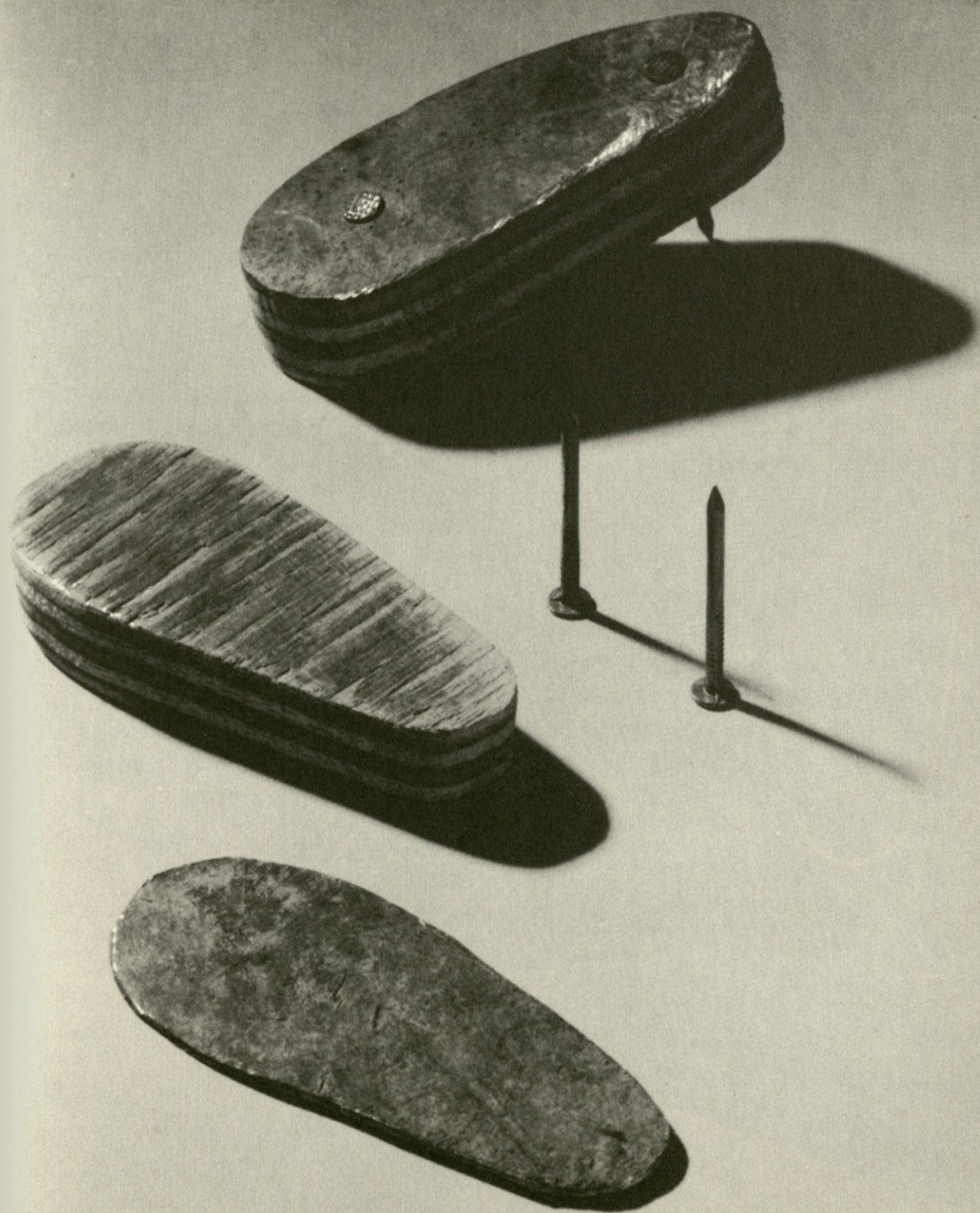
MAKING THE FEET

First make a cardboard shape similar to the shape of the wood in the photograph two-and-a-half inches long. This serves as a pattern around which you can trace.

Trace two outlines on the 5-ply wood, and two on the lead. Cut them out and fasten the lead to the wood with two one-inch nails.

Leave the nail at the narrow part of the foot protruding; snip off the other nail and file down.

The foot is then hammered on to the end of the leg.



MAKING THE HANDS

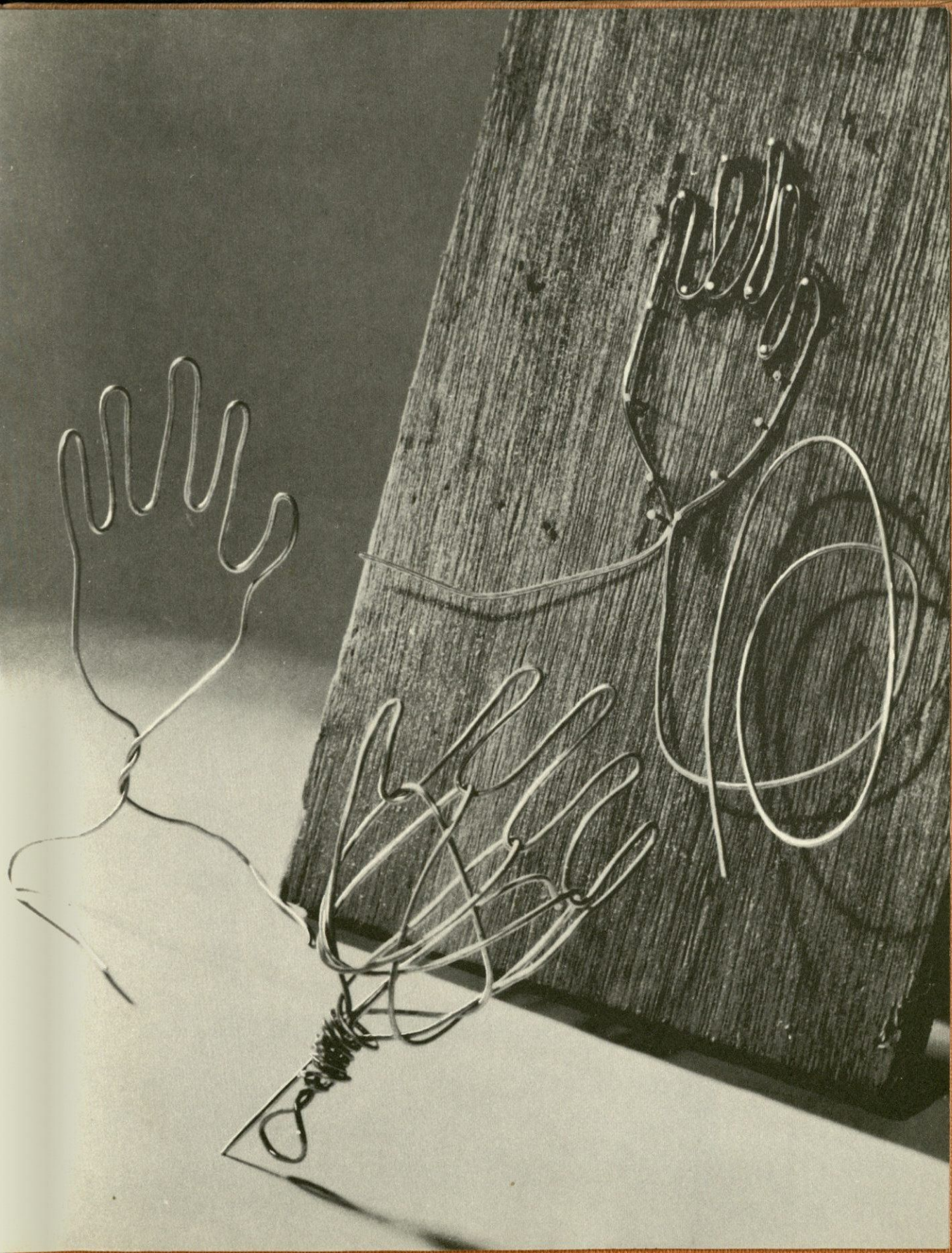
On a piece of waste board trace the outline of a hand about three inches in length from the top of the second finger to the wrist. At intervals around this outline, knock in some small nails as shown in the photograph.

It is now an easy matter to bend some flexible wire to the shape of a hand. This shape is taken off the board, a loop is made at the end of the wrist, and the whole is strengthened by filling in the palm with wire, and by twisting wire round the wrist itself.

You take a roll of adhesive plaster and carefully bind the fingers, the palm, and the wrist, leaving only the loop uncovered. If the plaster is flesh coloured, there is no need to paint the hands.

The hand is then joined to the lower arm by inserting the loop in the saw cut there, and putting a small piece of wire through the hole awaiting it, and bending the wire back to prevent its slipping out.

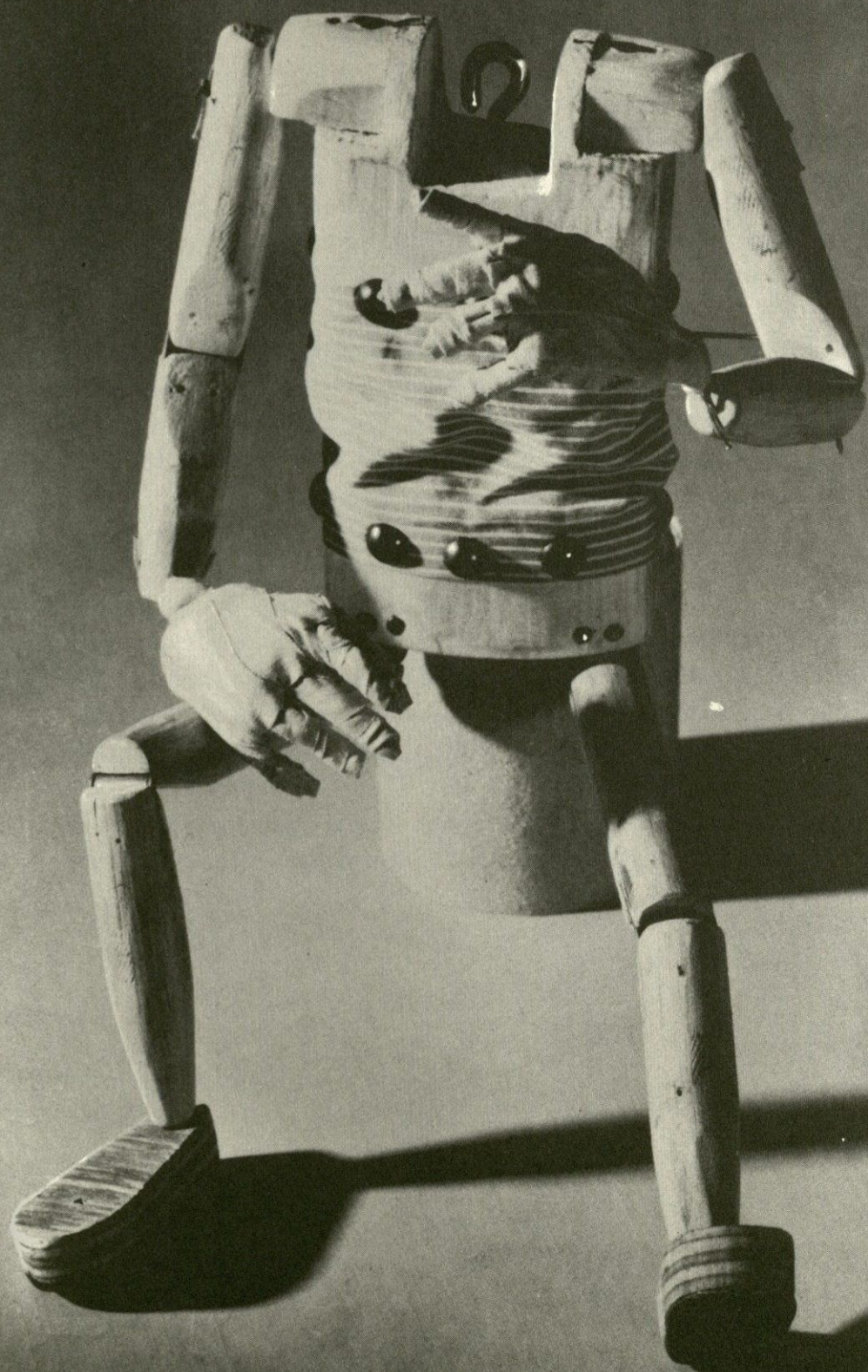
The hand should swing freely. As the hand is of wire, it may be bent as required: for example, to hold a trumpet.



THE FINISHED BODY

The body is complete, and here you have a picture of it. If any point has not been quite clear up till now, reference to this picture will, I think, help you.

You will notice that a hook has been screwed into the centre of the neck slot. This will receive the loop which protrudes from the neck of the puppet's head.



THE FINISHED PUPPET

The head is fitted on to its hook, and the gap in the hook is closed by the means of pliers. You have made your puppet.

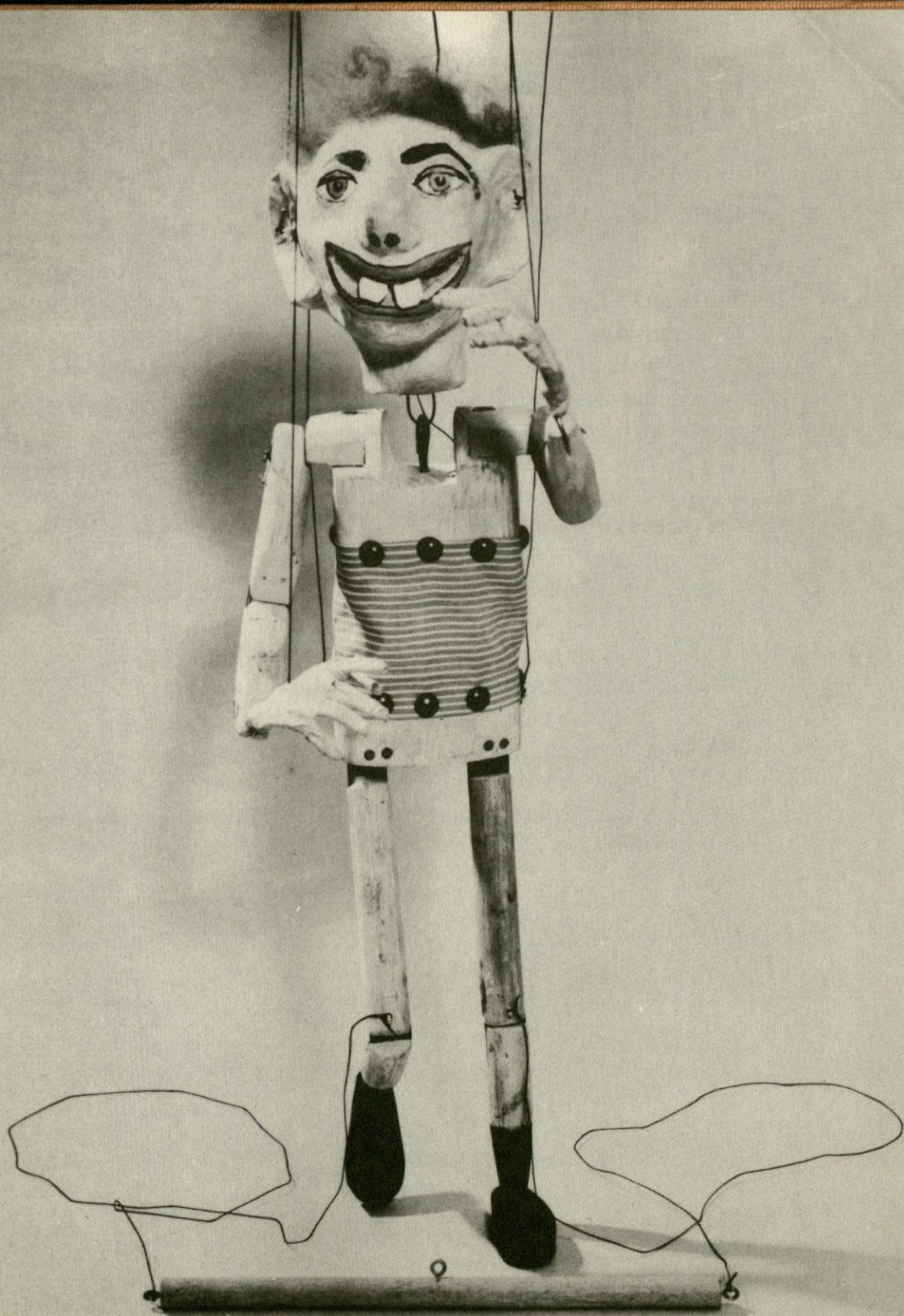
But an important part of the job still remains. This is to string the puppet.

From the photograph you will see that small brass screw eyes have been screwed in the legs just above the knees. These are three-eighths-of-an-inch in size. Before screwing them into the dowelling, make a hole to receive them with the bradawl as they are easily broken if forced.

An eye is screwed on each hip, and in the middle of the back.

Lengths of black carpet thread are then tied to these screw eyes, to the loop at each ear (to do this thread a needle and push the needle through the top of the ear at the back), and to the hands. The thread from hand to hand is one continuous piece. It is put through the hand with a needle and a knot is made on the palm side.

The piece for manipulating the legs is shown at the feet of the puppet. This is a thin piece of dowelling with larger screw eyes in it.



THE CROSS-PIECE

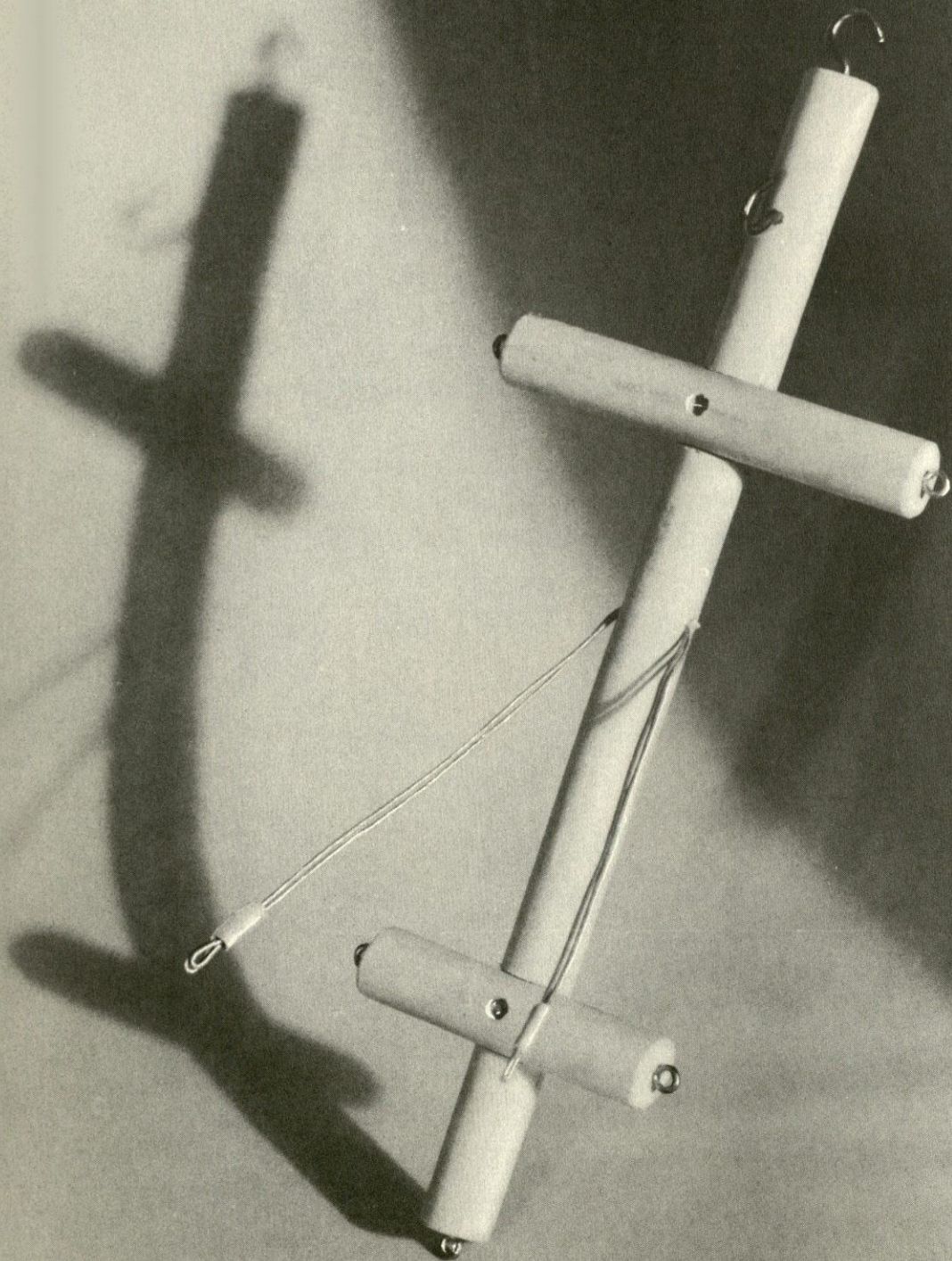
This is made out of three-quarters-of-an-inch dowelling. Its length is eleven-and-a-half-inches. The top cross-piece is four-and-a-half-inches; the bottom three inches.

The hook at the top is for hanging up the puppet. The hook just below this takes the piece of dowelling for controlling the feet, which you saw in the previous photograph.

The two eyes in the top cross-piece take the two threads from the hips. The two eyes in the bottom cross-piece take the threads from the ears. The eye at the end of the dowelling takes a thread from the middle of the back.

A hole is drilled through the side of the centre stick. A double piece of wire is put through here, and bent to the shape shown. A loop is made at each end of the wire. Through these loops, the thread joining the hands runs freely. A small piece of adhesive tape bound just behind the loops will prevent the thread catching.

The larger cross-piece is three inches from the top; the smaller one-and-three-quarters from the bottom. The hole is almost central.

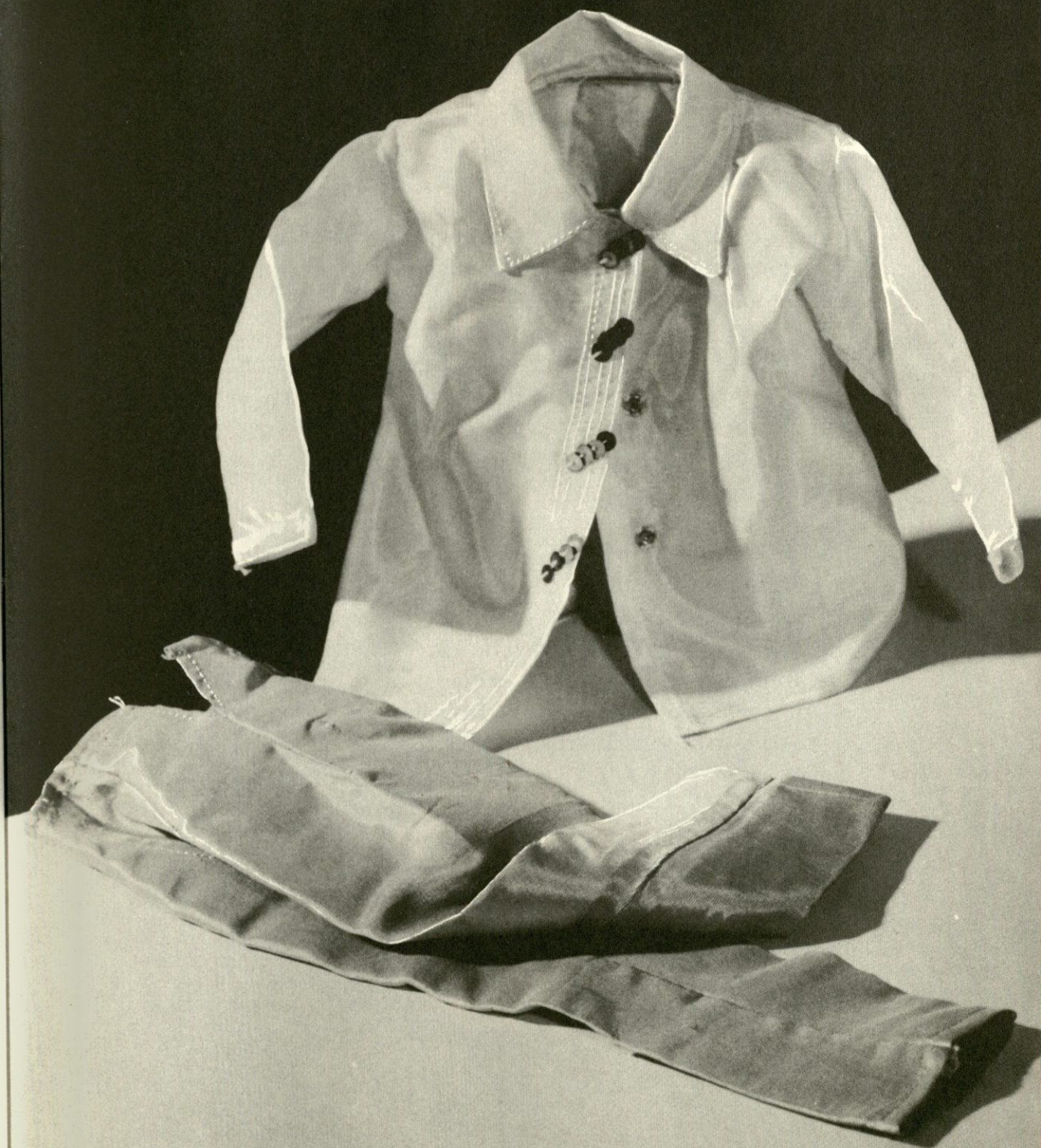


DRESSING THE PUPPET

The puppet is, of course, dressed before the strings are fixed. In order to hide the strings when you are controlling the puppet, a black or very dark background is necessary. For this reason you should dress the puppet in bright or light materials.

The clothes do not have to be elaborate affairs. The coat and trousers in the photograph are simply made out of soft, bright material.

The top of the trousers is pinned to the wood of the chest with drawing pins. Some pins under the collar of the coat fasten it to the neck of the puppet, and do not interfere with the movement of the head.



CONTROLLING THE PUPPET

This is best learnt by practice, and in this way you will develop your own individual manner of controlling the puppet's movements.

To start you off, however, a glance at the photograph will help. I have not said anything about the length of the threads. These should be of sufficient length to enable you to hold the puppet comfortably in front of you. Of course, if you intend to stand up high behind a stage the threads will have to be longer.

Hold the cross-piece in one hand, leaving the other hand free to control the legs or hands. Beginners tend to let the puppet crumple at the knees: practising before a mirror will help you to overcome this.

Ideas for puppet shows can be got by listening to record programmes on the radio and casting your puppet in the role of the individual performer. Instrumental solos are not difficult to perform, using a suitable record. Should you become so proficient as to wish to give a show in public, you must first of all find out whether the record you intend using is copyright.

Finally, when the puppet is not in use keep it hung up with the puppet itself tied up in a bag. This keeps it clean and prevents tangles.

